

Texas Animal Health Commission

Effective Infrastructure

Considering the immensity of animal agriculture in Texas and the resulting workload and scope of duties, the TAHC staff may seem small--about 200 for fiscal year 2003.

At the height of the war against cattle brucellosis, the TAHC employed more than 350 staff, most of whom were livestock health inspectors who made "ranch calls" to test cattle. As Texas progressed in winning the brucellosis battle, the TAHC began to "shrink" its workforce.

Today with a legislatively mandated maximum of 217 staff, the agency is "right-sized" to maintain a gainfully employed, but cross-trained staff to handle a variety of diseases and species of livestock. Loyalty, dedication and determination describe the key attributes of a "typical" TAHC'er. Career ladders and a variety of training opportunities provide for the long-term employee to grow and develop professionally.

A most important skill

The ability to "listen carefully" is vital to communicating with producers and developing the relationships that encourage ranchers to report possible problems to their veterinarian, their local livestock health inspector or regulatory field veterinarian. **Field jobs are NOT a good career choice for a desk jockey, as the field staff has been known to continue herd or flock testing in driving rainstorms, or in darkness to get the job done.**

Career fields represented at the TAHC include:

- About 90 **animal health inspectors** are sited strategically across the state, working from offices in their homes and reporting to one of eight field offices. The inspectors are "frontline" representatives of the TAHC and must be proficient in handling and inspecting every species of livestock, including exotic hoofstock and ratites, such as emus and ostriches. They also must be comfortable in the livestock pen, the auction market, slaughter plant, or in the producer's living room, as they make ranch visits to explain and answer questions, collect epidemiological data and herd history information, as well as blood and tissue samples from livestock for disease diagnosis.

Besides knowledge of domestic and foreign diseases, tick identification and regulations, the inspector also must be willing to use hand-held and desktop computers and printers. Furthermore, they must check that diseased livestock are handled according to U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and TAHC regulations to ensure their correct disposition and traceability of the animals back to their herd of origin.

- Eight of the 22 TAHC **veterinarians** serve as area directors, in charge of a field office. In addition to administrative duties, these veterinarians, like field veterinarians, handle diagnostic duties, and develop herd plans with private veterinary practitioners and producers to control and eradicate disease. Many of the veterinarians are trained as foreign animal disease diagnosticians, having completed specialized training at the Plum Island Disease Laboratory on Plum Island, New York.

- **A program administrator** in each area office supervises the animal health inspectors and the field office staff.

- **Veterinary epidemiologists** are the “disease detectives” with advanced degrees in disease transmission and eradication methods. These specialists track infection to its source and trace the movement and sale of exposed and diseased livestock to determine where infection may have come from and where it might have spread.

- **Administrative support staff** in the Austin headquarters and in field offices and laboratories maintain records, process documents affecting herd or flock quarantines or releases, and process agency bills. These team members also ensure offices run smoothly and enter computer data critical to the agency’s operation.

- **Laboratory technicians** and **microbiologists** run the complex tests on blood, milk and tissue samples, and identify pests, such as ticks, making it possible for TAHC veterinarians and epidemiologists to have the scientific tools for diagnosing disease. Nearly three million samples are processed in the State-Federal each year, which consists of a main laboratory in Austin and three small “satellite” laboratories in Fort Worth, Palestine and Lubbock.

Our Partners in the Field

To augment the field staff, **private veterinary practitioners** are key to effective surveillance, diagnosis and control of disease. Because of their close working relationship with livestock producers, they often are first on the scene when a disease problem arises. For example, a watchful private veterinary practitioner notified the TAHC when she spotted possible screwworms in a dog moved to a military base in San Antonio from Panama. Her prompt reporting of the situation allowed immediate action to be taken by the TAHC and the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture’s Veterinary Services averted a possible outbreak of the dangerous pest, which has been eradicated in the U.S.

